

VZCZCXRO5269
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHCN
DE RUEHCI #0574/01 3620952
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 280952Z DEC 06
FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1319
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0306
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0485
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0483
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0048
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0308
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 0134
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0088
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0125
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1633
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1205

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000574

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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS EXPERT IDENTIFIES AREAS OF
COOPERATION FOR CALCUTTA'S WETLANDS MANAGEMENT

11. (SBU) Summary: Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) Ecologist and Regulatory Program Manager Wade L. Eakle visited Calcutta November 1-7, 2006. Eakle met senior Government of West Bengal (GOWB) officials representing the different agencies involved in wetlands management and administration to explore the possibility of cooperation between ACE and the Environment Department of the GOWB in drawing up a comprehensive Management Action Plan for the East Calcutta Wetlands. One GOWB official expressed interest in signing a memorandum of agreement with the USG in this regard. Eakle also visited wetland areas and interacted with stakeholders, activist groups and journalists. Based on his meetings and observations, Mr. Eakle has drawn up a report, outlining the areas of cooperation in formulating the plan and subsequent action. A cooperation agreement between the ACE and an appropriate Indian government agency could be a possible result of Eakle's visit. End Summary.

What Eakle saw in Calcutta

12. (U) The 12,500-hectare East Calcutta Wetlands (ECW), located 5-km from the eastern edge of Calcutta (also known as Kolkata) in West Bengal, were accorded international recognition as a protected area under the Ramsar (Iran) Convention in August 12002. The ECW serve a critical function by receiving the untreated municipal wastewater from the city, where it has been used in traditional practices of fish farming and agriculture by thousands of local farmers since the early 1900's. In March 2006, the Government of West Bengal passed the East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Act, establishing the multi-agency East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority (EKWMA) with specific functions and powers related to the maintenance and preservation of land in the ECW, as well as a regulatory authority for evaluating proposed land use changes and compensatory mitigation projects in the ECW. The Act, among other things, directed the EKWMA to prepare action plans in conformance with the Ramsar Convention, to update land use maps, and to demarcate the boundary of the ECW. In October 2006, the West Bengal Department of Environment issued rules and regulations establishing the procedural requirements for authorizing land use changes and compensatory mitigation in the ECW.

Suggested Next Steps

13. (SBU) Based on Eakle's assessment, there are a number of areas in which the USG could work to further GOWB wetlands management efforts. These include:

a) GIS System: There is scope for consolidating all existing geo-spatial land use and other relevant data into a centralized Geographic Information System (GIS) readily accessible to EKWMA agencies, NGO's and interested stakeholders. The GIS operated by the Indian Chamber of Commerce should be investigated for this use. [Note: The Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) hosts a GIS-based database on industrial hazards and its mitigation for the city of Haldia which is home to a major port and number of chemical and petrochemical industries. End Note.]

b) Remote Imagery: Eakle suggested use of recent remote imagery (true color aerial photos or satellite) at an appropriate scale to identify, characterize and delineate wetlands and other aquatic resources within the Ramsar-designated ECW boundary. These could be verified using sample mapping units using a stratified random approach, and could be incorporated into the final wetlands/waters map in the GIS with other data layers. These technical capabilities already exist with the agencies currently associated with ECW management and administration.

c) Complete a functional assessment of the ECW using hydro-geomorphic (HGM) classification, reference wetlands and functional indices.

d) Hold a multi-day workshop with all EKWMA agencies, NGO's and stakeholders to present the results of the planning-level wetland identification and functional assessment. Define goals and objectives for aquatic resources preservation, restoration and management in the ECW for action plan direction.

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e) Develop a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between the appropriate Government of India (GOI) agency, such as the Ministry of Environment (on behalf of the West Bengal Department of Environment) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to promote future collaboration, cooperation, and technical assistance, if requested, in the further development and implementation of a management action plan and associated tasks of mutual interest for the ECW. GOWB Environment Secretary M.L. Meena expressed his interest in signing such an agreement with ACE. If future services are desired, additional resources would likely be necessary. Potential sources include the U.S. Agency for International Development, international organizations (i.e., United Nations, World Bank), or GOI. Unfortunately, the Corps of Engineers is precluded from entering into MOAs with state-level governments in other countries.

f) Develop ECW-specific, hydro-geomorphic-based, GIS-evaluation tools for use by the EKWMA to assess environmental impacts associated with proposed land use changes (wetland/water body fills) and proposed compensatory mitigation projects within the ECW.

14. (SBU) Comment: Significant scientific work has been completed in the ECW and would form a good foundation for any wetlands management plan. Despite this wealth of knowledge and local scientific capacity, there should be more collaboration and communication between the various government departments and NGO's interested in the ECW, especially with regard to the collection, mapping, storage, and analysis of geo-spatial data. If the GOWB, through the Government of India, decides to engage with the ACE in preparing the plan, an agreement might be an appropriate next step to explore. END COMMENT.
JARDINE